

Job Stress, School Support, and Occupational Happiness among Mainstream Teachers in Inclusive Education: A Mixed Methods Study from China

Zhou Xueping, Khairul Azhar Jamaludin

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

Corresponding Author Email: P154249@ukm.edu.my

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Abstract

Teachers' occupational well-being plays a critical role in the successful and sustainable implementation of inclusive education. Yet mainstream teachers who are responsible for teaching students with special educational needs (SEN) often face heavier workloads, more complex instructional demands, and insufficient institutional support, all of which may undermine their professional well-being. This study examined differences in occupational happiness, job stress, and perceived school support between teachers with and without SEN teaching responsibilities in mainstream schools, and explored the factors shaping teachers' occupational well-being in inclusive education. A convergent mixed methods design was employed. Quantitative data were collected from 405 in-service primary and secondary school teachers in Chengdu, China, using the Teacher Work Happiness Questionnaire (TWH-Q); the sample comprised 202 teachers with and 203 teachers without SEN teaching responsibilities. Independent-samples *t*-tests were used to compare the two groups, and semi-structured interviews with 10 teachers were analysed using thematic analysis. Teachers with SEN teaching responsibilities reported significantly lower occupational happiness and perceived school support, but significantly higher job stress, than teachers without such responsibilities ($p < .001$). The qualitative findings indicated that increased workload, insufficient professional training, limited educational resources, and inadequate institutional support were the main factors influencing teachers' occupational well-being. These findings underscore the importance of strengthening school-based support systems, expanding professional development, and addressing workload pressures to enhance teacher well-being and promote the sustainable development of inclusive education in China.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Occupational Happiness, Job Stress, Perceived School Support, Mainstream Teachers, Mixed Methods

Introduction

Inclusive education is currently a leading focus of education reform, with the aim of ensuring all students, regardless of their ability and learning requirements, have equal access to high quality education (Ainscow, 2020; Ainscow et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2020). With the increase in

inclusive schools, teachers are tasked with the responsibility of adapting their lessons, providing students with special needs individualised attention, accommodating different types of learners, and maintaining positive relationships with parents and educational colleagues (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Tomlinson, 2014). The additional professional resources teachers are expected to use to accommodate different student requirements may impact on their professional happiness and overall professional well-being (Hascher & Waber, 2021; McCallum et al., 2021).

Furthermore, teachers are expected to cope with increased professional workload associated with implementing inclusive instruction and may also experience higher job stress and occupational burnout, especially when their schools are inadequate to support them (Hascher, 2023; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Previous work has shown that the long-time pressures associated with high work load, excessive job demands and unaccommodating school resources may affect teachers' well-being, which in turn can result in emotional exhaustion and low levels of professional commitment (Madigan & Kim, 2021; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). While teachers' experiences in inclusive education may be influenced by their individual capability to cope, there are many school-level factors such as professional development opportunities, administrative support, adequate learning resources, and collaborative work opportunities that also influence their experiences (OECD, 2020; Schleicher, 2022). In China, some research has shown that the lack of school support and limited opportunities for professional collaboration may relate to more severe teacher burnout and lower well-being in inclusive education (Guillemot et al., 2022; Wang & Chen, 2022; Zhu et al., 2023).

Given that previous research has mostly focussed on teacher occupational well-being in inclusive education, some areas of concern remain. First, the majority of previous studies have taken a more general perspective on teachers' experiences in inclusive classrooms (Hascher & Waber, 2021; Zhang & Chen, 2023), and few have looked at differences between mainstream teachers who teach students with special needs and those who don't. The reasons why the proportion of students with special needs in the class can affect teachers' occupational well-being need further attention (Chen, 2024; Wang & Chen, 2022). Given that teachers with the responsibility to teach students with SEN may have different professional demands, work conditions and occupational experiences, the comparison between the two groups is essential (Hussain et al., 2011; Langer, 2013).

Second, while it is acknowledged that job stress and school support are related to teachers' well-being, there have been very limited attempts at identifying the relationship between teachers' occupational happiness in inclusive education and its related variables: job stress and school support. It may be valuable to have qualitative data on teachers' perceptions of these related variables and their influence on the teacher experience, since quantitative comparison cannot fully explain why the differences exist and the factors involved (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Third, empirical research in teacher occupational happiness in China is limited: while there have been many studies on the implementation of policy for inclusive education, teachers' attitudes, or inclusive education teaching and learning practices, fewer studies have focused on occupational happiness, despite occupational well-being being a key indicator of

sustainable inclusive education (UNESCO, 2020; Wang & Chen, 2022). Mixed-methods designs are likewise frequently absent, even though they might help to blend the statistical and contextual (Liu & Zhang, 2023; Shorten & Smith, 2017). In response to this, this research examines occupational happiness among primary and secondary school teachers in Chengdu, China, whose schools are inclusive. The research's objectives are as follows: (1) to determine whether there are variations in teachers' occupational happiness, their levels of stress, and their sense of school support according to whether they are or are not teaching students with SEN; (2) to examine teachers' personal experience and perceived barriers toward inclusive education via qualitative interviews. The results will assist to create evidence-based school support practices, improve teacher occupational happiness, and support inclusive education.

Literature Review

Inclusive Education and Teacher Well-Being

Inclusive education seeks to provide all students, irrespective of their ability, background, and/or need, with equal opportunity to quality education (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Inclusive education involves inclusion in regular classrooms with adaptations and modifications, tailored education, collaborative support and an inclusive climate, based on principles such as Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2018; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Tomlinson, 2014). There is growing global attention on inclusive education and mainstream teachers have become essential players in the realization of inclusive schooling, taking on more duty to satisfy diverse student needs in general classrooms (Alves et al., 2020; Hascher & Waber, 2021).

While inclusive education brings a lot of benefits for students with SEN, this shift can also lead to professional challenges for mainstream teachers (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Wang & Chen, 2022). Specifically, mainstream teachers should differentiate instruction, manage diverse classroom behaviors, cooperate with parents and professionals and adjust assessment and evaluation while adhering to the national curriculum (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Wang & Chen, 2022). It may result in heavier work loads, greater emotional demands and professional pressure on teachers and their well-being could, therefore, be key to successful teaching and sustainable inclusive education (Guillemot et al., 2022; McCallum et al., 2021).

Teacher well-being has attracted increasing research interest, due to its connection with professional engagement, teachers' efficacy, resiliency and, subsequently, the achievement of students (Benevene et al., 2020; McCallum et al., 2021; OECD, 2020). In this study, occupational happiness is one component of the teachers' well-being, which refers to teachers' positive emotions, professional fulfillment and the satisfaction gained from teaching. The more well they feel, teachers are more able to persist in the profession, and effectively address complex circumstances (Day & Gu, 2014). By contrast, prolonged occupational stress and too much work load and the lack of adequate supports from the organization are likely to result in emotional exhaustion, diminished efficacy and lower levels of satisfaction for the job (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018).

The inclusive education in China developed quickly under national promotion to promote educational equity and improve access to education for students with disabilities, resulting in a surge of students with SEN education in mainstream schools in recent years (Liu and Wang,

2021). However, general education teachers are currently still facing many obstacles to successfully implement inclusive teaching, as they do not feel well enough professionally prepared and adequately supported by the school (Fu et al. 2022; Wang and Chen, 2022; Zhang et al. 2023), and lack of specific expertise (Wang et al. 2022). For sustainable implementation of inclusive practices in mainstream school, it is essential to identify under what conditions the mainstream teachers who are responsible for teaching of students with SEN would feel occupationally happy.

Occupational Happiness as an Indicator of Teacher Well-Being

Occupational well-being of teacher has recently been gaining much attention and focus in educational research because it plays a great role in how well they work, their loyalty to their profession and whether they stay in their job or not (Hascher & Waber, 2021). The specific definitions of it have varied depending on the theoretical framework adopted, though most researchers agree that it describes the positive psychological functioning and subjective evaluation of their work-related experiences and includes their emotional condition, sense of professional worth, relationships at the workplace, and perceptions of their work competence (Hascher & Waber, 2021). More and more studies argue that teacher occupational well-being is not simply absence of negative feelings at work and absence of stress but is actually a multi-faceted concept that covers a range of aspects such as emotional, cognitive and social components (Benevene et al., 2020; Hascher and Waber 2021). Within this conceptual framework, occupational happiness can be described as teachers' positive feeling, sense of work satisfaction and achievement (Hakanen & Schaufeli, 2012), and teachers with higher levels of occupational well-being have better performance in teaching and work, better engagement at work, and more psychological resilience when working in stressful contexts (Gu and Day, 2013; Day, & Gu, 2014).

Within theoretical models that explain occupational well-being of teachers, the PERMA Model proposed by Seligman (2011) has had great influence in the field of educational research, since the model considers well-being as consisting of five multidimensional constructs, that are Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. Different from other existing approaches to work-related well-being which tend to focus on job satisfaction or the reduction of stress and negative feelings, the PERMA model suggests that teachers' well-being should be developed through their positive resources or positive experiences and states which lead to their professional growth and achievement (Diener et al., 2018; Kern et al., 2015). Within education context, teachers who are more positive in emotion, experience positive social relations, and have high sense of accomplishment will have better motivation, higher resilience, and more commitment to work, even though the teaching workload continues to grow (Seligman, 2011). So the perspective of PERMA Model can be useful in understanding teacher occupational happiness, as it is a specific aspect of the well-being of teachers, especially in difficult work situations as in inclusive classes.

Research shows that teacher occupational well-being is a complex construct, which is influenced by both teacher individual differences and school organizational factors. At an organizational level, teacher well-being is associated with a range of school-level constructs including leadership style and culture, supportive colleagues and social climate, professional support and professional development opportunities, and adequate work resources and conditions (Hakanen et al. 2020; Hakanen & Schaufeli 2012; Vekle 2015). On the other hand,

high workload, lack of clear professional expectations, and lack of institutional support may contribute to occupational stress and adverse effects of teachers' psychological functioning (Collie et al., 2020; OECD, 2020). In terms of Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) framework, teachers' well-being is a reflection of job demands as compared to the resources: excessive demands may exhaust psychological resources, whereas organisational support can mitigate such adverse influences and facilitate positive professional experiences (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). For this reason, this framework is relevant in the context of inclusive education, as teachers experience higher demands for instruction and rely on resources and supports available within the school.

The study on Chinese teacher occupational well-being has been increasing, which considers factors, including professional development, school climate, occupational stress, and social support (Fu et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022; Wang & Teng, 2021; Zhou & Yao, 2023). However, these studies are mainly based on the sample of teachers as a whole and have seldom compared between those with SEN teaching responsibilities and those without. Therefore, little is known about whether teachers with SEN teaching responsibilities have different levels of occupational happiness from teachers without. With the increasing implementation of inclusive education in China, teachers in mainstream schools are likely to have additional responsibilities and work for adapting instruction, supporting emotions, managing behaviour, and communicating with families and professionals. These distinct work requirements may lead to different experiences in the workplace, thus the effect of SEN teaching responsibilities on teachers' occupational happiness needs attention.

Job Stress, School Support, and Teacher Occupational Happiness in Inclusive Education

The implementation of inclusive education has brought increased requirements for teachers in mainstream classrooms. In an inclusive classroom, teachers are expected to respond to students' diverse learning needs, modify instruction, manage heterogeneous behavioural responses, and establish partnerships with parents and professionals while implementing the curriculum standards (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; UNESCO, 2020). These additional work requires more cognitive and emotional resources as well as more professional support, and is therefore a major source of occupational stress that impacts teachers' occupational happiness in the inclusive school setting (Guillemot et al., 2022).

The impact of job stress on teacher occupational well-being has been widely established. The Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) framework illustrates the relationship between teachers' work experience and their professional experience as job demands versus organisational resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Excessive job demands, including high workload, emotional labour, time pressure and role complexity, can undermine and deplete teachers' psychological resources and thus lead to job stress. Perceived organisational resources, including professional support, autonomy, and collegiality, on the other hand, may buffer the negative effects of job demands and enhance teacher motivation, engagement, and positive professional experiences (Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Hakanen et al., 2006; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). The balance of occupational demands and resources in explaining variation in teachers' well-being has been demonstrated (Collie et al., 2020).

The fallout from prolonged work-related stress could also be examined via occupational burnout theory. Maslach and Leiter (2016) asserted that enduring continuous job demands

that exceed the amount of job resources available could lead to emotional exhaustion, feelings of low professional accomplishment, and poor psychological functioning; longitudinal and meta-analytic studies found that these processes were also related to decreased job satisfaction and higher attrition (Madigan & Kim, 2021; Pressley, 2021). For instance, mainstream teachers may report higher stress levels when supporting students with SEN without sufficient preparation, knowledge, or necessary materials. Previous research suggested that teachers engaged in inclusive education often face difficulties in providing differentiated instruction, managing their classrooms, and communicating with parents, which may negatively influence their sense of confidence and positive psychological experiences (Li et al., 2022; Liu & Wang, 2021; Wang & Chen, 2022). Therefore, examining job stress may be helpful in elucidating the differences in occupational happiness between teachers with and without SEN teaching responsibilities.

Although job demands may have detrimental impacts on teacher occupational happiness, perceived school support serves as a vital organisational resource that can mitigate such effects. School support represents practical, professional, and emotional resources that are provided by the school setting; it encompasses administrative leadership, professional training, teaching resources, collegial interaction, and emotional encouragement. A supportive school environment in inclusive education may help to improve teachers' confidence, increase their professional efficacy, and facilitate more effective responses to diverse needs (Collie et al., 2020; OECD, 2020). Evidence also shows that teachers who perceived that they were supported by their organisation had lower occupational stress, higher job satisfaction, and greater well-being (Fu et al., 2022; McCallum et al., 2021; Wang & Li, 2023; Zhou & Yao, 2023), whereas lack of support may lead to intensifying perceptions of job pressure and ambiguity especially for teachers implementing inclusive practices.

There are still several limitations in the existing literature. First, although stress, burnout, and well-being of teachers in inclusive education contexts have been studied, these variables have mostly been investigated in isolation and not in an integrated model that considers job demands and resources. Second, there is a lack of comparison between mainstream teachers with and without SEN teaching responsibility and whether inclusive teaching is associated with different outcomes of teachers' occupational experiences. Third, studies in Chinese contexts are scarce, especially regarding the links between job stress, perceived school support and teacher occupational happiness in Chinese mainstream inclusive settings. Such research is vital in informing how educational systems can support teacher professional sustainability and contribute to better quality inclusive practice.

Theoretical Framework

Based on the above literature, this study conceptualises teacher occupational happiness from a contextual framework, suggesting that teachers' happiness at work is related to a combination of contextual job demands and organisational resources in inclusive education. Specifically, teachers' well-being is not just a psychological variable that resides only within teachers; instead, teachers' occupational happiness is shaped by the interaction between the demands that teachers encounter and the resources that teachers have available to meet these demands. This framework comprises three distinct perspectives with complementary explanatory mechanisms. First, Seligman's (2011) PERMA model serves as a guide to understand occupational happiness as a positive facet of teachers' well-being. By defining

well-being as the presence of positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment, the model conceptualises teachers' occupational happiness not merely as the absence of stress but as teachers' positive professional experience in which they feel happy, fulfilled, meaningfully engaged and positively connected (Diener et al., 2018; Kern et al., 2015; Seligman, 2011). Second, the JD–R model provides the main framework for understanding the association between contextual factors and teachers' occupational happiness (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Specifically, taking the SEN teaching responsibility as a contextual job demand since teachers have to provide instructional adaptation, individual support, and classroom management, and communicate more with families and other professionals, teachers are likely to face additional work pressures and experience lower occupational happiness. Perceived school support could be regarded as an organisational resource which may compensate job demands by providing professional and psychological support, collaborative interaction, administrative assistance, and educational resources (Hakanen et al., 2006; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018). Third, occupational burnout theory (Maslach & Leiter, 2016) suggests that excessive and unrelenting workload, high emotional demands, and the lack of required resources may lead to job stress, negative feelings, emotional exhaustion, loss of sense of professional accomplishment, and poor psychological functioning that is even more prominent in inclusive classrooms.

Underpinned by this conceptual framework, the current study proposes that teachers' occupational happiness would be associated with inclusive teaching responsibility, work stress and perceived school support. Compared to teachers without SEN teaching responsibility, teachers with inclusive teaching responsibilities would have more job demands and job stress whereas adequate support would have positive effects. Specifically, this study compared teachers with and without SEN teaching responsibility in examining the differences in occupational happiness, job stress and perceived school support among Chinese mainstream teachers.

Methodology

Research Design

A convergent mixed methods design was adopted for this study to investigate occupational happiness of mainstream primary and secondary school teachers in the inclusive education contexts of Chengdu, China. A convergent design means collecting both quantitative and qualitative data at the same time, analyzing each data separately, and comparing or merging the findings at the stage of interpretation and explanation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Shorten & Smith, 2017). This study was appropriate for applying a convergent design because occupational happiness is multidimensional, influenced by both objectively measured occupational conditions and subjective personal experiences and perceptions of occupational happiness.

The quantitative portion of the study investigated differences in occupational happiness, job stress, and perceived school support between teachers with SEN teaching responsibilities in mainstream classrooms and teachers without SEN teaching responsibilities in mainstream classrooms. A questionnaire was used to compare teachers' occupational happiness in terms of statistics and provide empirical evidence for differences related to SEN teaching responsibilities. The qualitative portion of the study explored the lived experiences of teachers in the implementation of inclusive education through a set of semi-structured

interviews. Teachers' occupational happiness, sources of job stress, difficulties in supporting students with SEN, and support forms from schools were investigated through interviews. The findings of the qualitative analysis were used to explain possible reasons for the observed statistical differences between teachers with and without SEN teaching responsibilities.

The quantitative and qualitative datasets were analyzed separately, followed by comparison or merging of findings. Comparison or merging of datasets allowed the researcher to see whether findings from the two data sets converge, or not, which enhances the understanding of the findings and the credibility of the study results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The conceptual framework developed based on the PERMA model, occupational burnout theory, and the JD–R framework provided the basis for the study to understand teachers' occupational happiness as associated with workplace demands, and organisational resources. The key constructs in the current study were occupational happiness, job stress, and perceived school support (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Participants and Sampling Procedure

The current study took place in Chengdu, China in the Sichuan Province. Chengdu has been gradually implementing inclusive education within the mainstream primary and secondary schools. Participants were teachers from mainstream primary and secondary schools that have enrolled students with SEN, implemented inclusive education in the school. A stratified sampling approach with convenience sampling was used in the current study to increase the diversity of the sample, and guarantee representation of teachers from different school stages. The participating schools were divided into three strata: primary schools, junior secondary schools, and senior secondary schools. Links to the questionnaire were distributed from the participating schools to the participants, who filled out the questionnaire at their own discretion, in accordance with their inclusive teaching experience and their willingness to participate.

A total of 420 questionnaires were distributed in the current study. 405 valid questionnaires were recovered, yielding a valid response rate of 96.43%. 202 questionnaires belonged to teachers who had SEN teaching responsibilities in mainstream classrooms, while 203 questionnaires were returned by teachers without SEN teaching responsibilities in mainstream classrooms. Categorisation of participants on the basis of inclusive teaching responsibilities facilitated analysis and comparisons in the variables of occupational happiness, job stress, and perceived school support. Table 1 summarizes demographic variables of the participants.

10 teachers participated in the qualitative portion of the study who were selected for semi-structured interviews using purposive sampling. Teachers' direct experiences of inclusive education made them valuable participants for this study. They were able to share their perceptions of occupational happiness, sources of job stress and perceived school support from schools in inclusive education context, and their difficulties in supporting SEN students. The 10 teachers belonged to three school levels, and with different periods of teaching experience, allowing a wide range of understanding of inclusive education and inclusive teachers. Participation in the study was voluntary. Prior to data collection, the purpose, method of the study, and participant's rights were all explained to each interviewee and informed consent were received in written format.

Instruments

Data was collected through the use of the Teacher Work Happiness Questionnaire (TWH-Q) which was designed by the researcher to evaluate teachers' occupational happiness, job stress, and perceived school support in inclusive education contexts. An extensive search for literature was undertaken in the development of TWH-Q. Literature on teachers' work well-being, inclusive education, work stress, and work burnout contributed to the development of the questionnaire with the aid of the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011), occupational burnout theory (Maslach & Leiter, 2016) and the Job Demand-Resources (JD-R) framework (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). These three theoretical frameworks guided the measurement of positive and negative experiences in the study.

The TWH-Q included four parts. The first part focused on participants' demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, years of experience, school level), while the remaining parts focused on three constructs: teacher occupational happiness (seven items), job stress (six items), and perceived school support (six items). The items on the teacher occupational happiness subscale evaluated teachers' sense of professional fulfilment, positive emotions experienced, and satisfaction gained from teaching; the job stress items explored teachers' perception of work load, instruction requirement, and psychological stress; the perceived school support items assessed the level of administrative support, opportunity of professional development, collaborative assistance, and access to educational resources. Each item of the three subscales had five response options ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicated the presence of higher levels of teacher occupational happiness, job stress, and perceived school support.

The initial set of items on the TWH-Q were evaluated by a panel of five experts (three university scholars who study education, two school teachers with years of teaching experience) to determine the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of each item. Then, the content validity of each item was assessed based on the Content Validity Ratio (CVR). Items with a CVR greater than the recommended value of 0.78 were kept, while other items were revised based on the comments from the expert panel. Before conducting the main survey, a pilot study involving 60 teachers (including teachers who work with and without SEN students) was conducted to evaluate the clarity, feasibility, and the degree of internal consistency among items. In the light of the pilot test feedback from teachers and recommendations from experts, unclear wording was revised, redundant items were removed, and the organisation of some items was rearranged to enhance clarity and to avoid potential bias. The result of the pilot test showed that the questionnaire can be completed within 10–15 min and is ready to be applied in large-scale surveys.

Internal consistency was examined with the aid of Cronbach's alpha. All three subscales demonstrated acceptable reliability: teacher occupational happiness ($\alpha = .919$), job stress ($\alpha = .917$), and perceived school support ($\alpha = .849$). In addition, the construct validity of the instrument was verified using the results from exploratory factor analysis (EFA), with a KMO value $> .70$ and a significant p-value ($< .001$) for Bartlett's test of sphericity, implying a strong degree of correlation in the dataset, which supports the construct validity of the instrument.

The interview protocol of the qualitative component was developed following the objectives and conceptual framework of this research. The interview questions focused on exploring the

experiences of teachers in implementing inclusive education, their perceptions on occupational happiness, stress, and types of support from the schools. Integrating the questionnaire findings with interview findings enabled researchers to have a deeper understanding on the occupational happiness of teachers in inclusive education.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected between January and May 2025 with a convergent mixed methods design. As the design indicates, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected in parallel with a concurrent data collection phase; the collected data were then analysed separately before merging at the interpretation stage of research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For the quantitative data, the developed TWH-Q was distributed to in-service teachers working in mainstream primary, junior secondary, and senior secondary schools in Chengdu. The survey was voluntary and responses collected anonymously; 405 valid questionnaires were eventually used. For the qualitative data, 10 teachers who were purposefully selected participated in a semi-structured interview, in which their experiences of teaching students with SEN and their perceptions on occupational happiness, stress, and school support were explored. In order to allow interviewees to provide more in-depth details to the interview topics while ensuring a certain degree of similarity across all interviews, a semi-structured interview protocol was adopted. After data collection, the quantitative and qualitative data were analysed separately before being merged for the integration stage of the study; this allowed researchers to integrate qualitative data with quantitative evidence and provide further explanations in line with the quantitative findings.

Data Analysis

According to the design of a convergent mixed methods study, quantitative and qualitative data were analysed independently before merged for the integration phase of the research. For the quantitative analysis, the statistical program IBM SPSS was adopted. The data were first screened for missing values, outliers and the assumptions for subsequent analysis (Field, 2018). Descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation) were applied to report the demographic data and the degree of the key variables. Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, while construct validity was verified using the results of EFA. Subsequently, independent-samples t-tests were performed to explore the differences in teacher occupational happiness, job stress, and perceived school support between teachers with SEN teaching responsibilities and without, with a significance level set at 0.05.

Thematic analysis was adopted for analysing the data collected from the interviews, following a systematic coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process included familiarising with the data and developing initial codes, reviewing patterns and developing categories, and finally, identifying themes based on teachers' experiences of implementing inclusive education, occupational happiness, job stress and perceived school support. Then, the identified themes were reviewed with the quantitative analysis findings during the interpretation phase to provide explanations to the quantitative results. Finally, by integrating the quantitative data with the insights from the qualitative data, we aimed at developing a better understanding of how the relationship between inclusive teaching responsibilities, job stress, perceived school support and teacher occupational happiness works.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers adhered to ethical guidelines to protect the rights, privacy, and confidentiality of the participants. The participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research, how data would be collected, potential risks and benefits, and their rights. We explicitly told participants their participation is voluntary and they can withdraw their participation anytime without any repercussions. Before the participants completed the questionnaires and took part in the interviews, they were asked to sign a written consent form. No personally identifying data was collected in the survey. In the interviews, we replaced the names with an ID number when we transcribed them and when we did the analysis to keep it anonymous. All the data were used only for academic research purposes. The data were kept confidential and safely stored with access limited to me alone. The data analysis results of the quantitative analysis were presented in totals. The qualitative data analysis results did not reveal the identities of participants or schools.

Findings*Participant Characteristics*

A total of 420 questionnaires were issued, and valid questionnaire data were collected from 405 participants (valid response rate = 96.43%). After data screening, 405 valid data were retained and were used for quantitative analysis. Based on teaching special educational needs students, participants were divided into two groups, including 202 participants (49.9%) who teach special educational needs students and 203 participants (50.1%) who do not teach special educational needs students. Table 1 shows the demographic distribution of the participants; most of them were females (86.7%, $n = 351$), while 13.3% ($n = 54$) were males. In terms of teaching experience, participants with 1–3 years teaching experience were most common (27.2%, $n = 110$), followed by 4–6 years (25.9%, $n = 105$), 7–10 years (20.0%, $n = 81$), 11–15 years (14.3%, $n = 58$), and participants with 16 years and over (12.6%, $n = 51$). In terms of different teaching levels, participants teaching primary school students were the most (54.3%, $n = 220$), followed by participants teaching junior secondary school students (43.5%, $n = 176$), and participants teaching senior secondary school students (2.2%, $n = 9$).

Table 1

Participant Characteristics of the Sample (N = 405)

Characteristic	Category	<i>n</i>	%
SEN teaching responsibilities	Yes	202	49.9
	No	203	50.1
Gender	Male	54	13.3
	Female	351	86.7
Teaching experience	1–3 years	110	27.2
	4–6 years	105	25.9
	7–10 years	81	20.0
	11–15 years	58	14.3
	16 years or more	51	12.6
School level	Primary school	220	54.3
	Junior secondary school	176	43.5
	Senior secondary school	9	2.2

Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the study variables. In terms of occupational happiness, teachers' average score was 23.56 (SD = 5.53), while the mean score for job stress and perceived school support was 19.56 (SD = 4.90) and 20.69 (SD = 4.71), respectively. The results summarise the general distribution of the study variables and form the basis for the group comparison later on.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables (N = 405)

Variable	M	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Teacher occupational happiness	23.56	5.53	7	33
Job stress	19.56	4.90	6	29
Perceived school support	20.69	4.71	6	30

Differences Between Teachers With and Without SEN Teaching Responsibilities

The researchers conducted independent-samples t-tests to compare the differences of occupational happiness, job stress, and perceived school support between teachers with and without special educational needs teaching responsibilities. Table 3 displays the results of the independent t-tests. Significant differences between teachers with and without special educational needs teaching responsibilities were found on occupational happiness ($p < .001$), job stress ($p < .001$), and perceived school support ($p < .001$). Teachers without special educational needs teaching responsibilities had higher scores in occupational happiness ($M = 27.33$, $SD = 3.87$) than those with special educational needs teaching responsibilities ($M = 19.78$, $SD = 4.20$), $t(403) = 18.80$, $p < .001$. On the contrary, teachers with special educational needs teaching responsibilities were under higher pressure of the job ($M = 22.39$, $SD = 4.85$) than those without special educational needs teaching responsibilities ($M = 16.74$, $SD = 2.92$), $t(403) = -14.22$, $p < .001$. Conversely, teachers without special education teaching responsibilities had a higher perception of school support ($M = 23.13$, $SD = 3.87$) than those with special education teaching responsibilities ($M = 18.24$, $SD = 4.18$), $t(403) = 12.21$, $p < .001$. Overall, compared with teachers without special education teaching responsibilities, teachers with special education teaching responsibilities reported lower levels of occupational happiness, higher job stress, and a lower perception of school support.

Table 3

Independent-Samples t-Test Results for the Study Variables

Variable	Group	n	M	SD	t	p
Teacher occupational happiness	Without SEN	203	27.33	3.87	18.80	< .001
	With SEN	202	19.78	4.20		
Job stress	Without SEN	203	16.74	2.92	-14.22	< .001
	With SEN	202	22.39	4.85		
Perceived school support	Without SEN	203	23.13	3.87	12.21	< .001
	With SEN	202	18.24	4.18		

Note. “Without SEN” = teachers without SEN teaching responsibilities; “With SEN” = teachers with SEN teaching responsibilities. $df = 403$ for all comparisons.

Qualitative Findings from Teacher Interviews

In addition to understanding teachers' occupation happiness, job stress and perceived school support, 10 teachers were interviewed to explore the factors that affect them. After the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, three major themes were identified: (1) workload and emotional demand in inclusive classrooms increased, (2) there was a lack of professional preparation and educational resources, and (3) school support and collaboration were important. The themes are outlined in Table 4.

Table 4

Summary of Themes Identified from Teacher Interviews

Theme	Key findings
Increased workload and emotional demands	Teachers with SEN teaching responsibilities reported heavier workloads arising from additional lesson preparation, curriculum adaptation, differentiated instruction, and classroom management. These demands contributed to emotional exhaustion, continuous stress, and psychological pressure.
Insufficient professional preparation and resources	Teachers identified limited specialised training, insufficient teaching resources, and inadequate institutional guidance as major barriers to implementing inclusive education. A lack of timely support increased feelings of isolation and reduced work well-being.
School support and collaborative practices	Teachers who perceived stronger support from school leaders and colleagues demonstrated better coping and greater job satisfaction. Peer collaboration, professional development opportunities, and a supportive school culture were considered important for improving well-being.

Theme 1: Increased Workload and Emotional Demands

Teachers consistently described inclusive teaching as involving greater instructional workload and emotional demands than regular classroom teaching. Participants reported spending additional time adapting instructional materials, designing differentiated learning activities, monitoring students' progress, and communicating with parents. These responsibilities increased both workload and emotional pressure, as Participant T3 explained:

“Teaching students with special needs requires more preparation and patience. Sometimes I need to spend extra time adjusting activities while also ensuring that other students can follow the lesson.” (T3)

Such accounts indicate that inclusive teaching responsibilities substantially increased teachers' professional demands and contributed to the emotional exhaustion reflected in the quantitative results.

Theme 2: Insufficient Professional Preparation and Educational Resources

Participants reported insufficient professional preparation for implementing inclusive education effectively. Many felt they lacked practical knowledge of differentiated instruction, behaviour management, and special education strategies. Limited access to professional

training, specialised teaching materials, and expert guidance further reduced their confidence in supporting students with SEN, as Participant T6 noted:

“We want to help these students, but sometimes we do not know the most appropriate methods. More professional training and guidance would make us feel more confident.” (T6)

These accounts suggest that inadequate professional preparation and limited educational resources constrained teachers' confidence and effectiveness, corresponding to the elevated job stress observed in the quantitative data.

Theme 3: The Importance of School Support and Collaborative Practices

Participants emphasised the role of school support and professional collaboration in facilitating inclusive education. Administrative support, collaboration among teachers, and effective communication with parents were perceived as essential for addressing the challenges of teaching students with SEN. Teachers who experienced stronger school support reported greater confidence and lower occupational stress, as Participant T8 observed:

“When the school provides support and teachers can discuss problems together, the pressure becomes easier to manage.” (T8)

These findings indicate that organisational support and collaborative practices played an important role in shaping teachers' experiences of inclusive education and their perceived school support.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The two sets of data were combined to better understand the occupation happiness of teachers in inclusive education. According to the findings of the quantitative data, compared with teachers without special education teaching responsibilities, teachers with special education teaching responsibilities reported a lower level of occupational happiness, a higher level of job stress, and a lower perception of school support. The qualitative findings explain the differences behind the differences in occupation happiness. Teachers' lower level of occupational happiness with special education teaching responsibilities is related to increased workload and emotional demands, including but not limited to curriculum adjustment, differentiated instruction, classroom management and communication with parents. Teachers' higher level of occupational happiness and lower level of job stress may result from their insufficient professional preparation and lack of educational resources. Teachers perceive lower support for school in that administrative support, professional support, and access to resources are very important in reducing the pressure teachers feel and increasing teachers' confidence in teaching. It can be seen that the occupation happiness of teachers in inclusive education is a result of the interaction between the two factors: special education teaching responsibilities can be both positive and negative, such as increasing teachers' workload and emotional pressure, while the school provides sufficient support, professional growth opportunities and collaborative practices, which can be seen as a factor that helps teachers' occupation happiness.

Discussion

Differences in Occupational Happiness

The study showed that there was a significant difference in occupational happiness between mainstream teachers in schools, and those with special education teaching responsibilities reported a lower level of occupational happiness. This shows that, on the one hand, inclusive education promotes equal education for children with diverse learning needs, and on the other hand, it also brings some requirements for mainstream teachers in terms of professional ability. This finding is consistent with research that indicates teachers' occupational happiness and well-being depend on factors such as the amount of work they do, the availability of professional resources, the learning of their daily students and other factors (Collie et al., 2020; Hascher & Waber, 2021; McCallum et al., 2021). Teachers with special education teaching responsibilities are responsible for not only the daily teaching of the class, but also for the individual education of students with disabilities. The requirements of the daily teaching plan adjustments, differentiated teaching strategies, daily teaching management, and parent-student communication may increase the teachers' cognitive demands and emotions, which in turn affects their work and professional satisfaction (Chen, 2024; Zhu et al., 2023).

The variation may also be interpreted via the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011). Inclusive teaching could boost teachers' sense of meaning as it allows them to play a role in educational justice and to assist different kinds of learners. But without proper preparation, resources, and institutional support, the other dimensions of well-being—positive emotion, engagement, and accomplishment—could be harmed (Kern et al., 2015; Lavy & Eshet, 2023). In this manner, teachers' occupational happiness with inclusive education is influenced not solely by their commitment towards supporting students with SEN but also by the conditions which make effective inclusive teaching possible. In keeping with theories of occupational burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2016), a persistent disproportion between requirements and available resources could lead to emotional tiredness and lessened satisfaction and this could help account for the lower occupational happiness reported among teachers who are responsible for SEN teaching (Madigan & Kim, 2021; Wang & Chen, 2022). Hence, raising teachers' occupational happiness would entail more than merely fostering positive attitudes towards inclusion; rather, it calls for sustainable approaches that include adequate in-service professional training, collaborative assistance networks, and enough support resources such that inclusive teaching could be viewed as a professional development opportunity and not just as an excessive strain (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

The Role of Job Stress in Inclusive Education

Teachers with SEN teaching responsibilities reported substantially higher job stress than those without such responsibilities, revealing the heavy professional pressure experienced in realizing inclusive education. While inclusive education is intended to offer equitable educational access to all students, regardless of need, implementing it often entails teachers carrying additional instructional, emotional, and administrative burdens (UNESCO, 2020; Zhu et al., 2023). This is in line with studies which showed that inclusive education could heighten occupational stress if teachers must adjust instructional approaches, create individualized lessons, handle different classroom behaviors, and deliver one-on-one support (Guillemot et al., 2022; McCallum et al., 2021; Wang & Chen, 2022). As opposed to usual settings, inclusive classrooms ask teachers to consistently negotiate between the needs of students with various

abilities while achieving overall classroom goals, and therefore this could create higher stress related to time pressure, emotional work, and perceived workload.

It is possible that the association between inclusive teaching obligations and job stress is explained with the JD-R model which postulates that occupational stress occurs when the job demands are greater than job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). In inclusive settings, teachers have greater job demands as they engage with curriculum modification, individualized support, classroom discipline, and communication with caregivers and colleagues, and when there are no accompanying training courses, resources and institutional back-up, this could lead to more mental stress and poorer health (Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Li et al., 2022). These findings align with the burnout perspective that prolonged exposure to high job demands can contribute to emotional exhaustion, especially when expectations exceed one's ability to respond (Pressley, 2021; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Teachers reported similar difficulties in the qualitative data in terms of increased additional preparation, adapting teaching materials, classroom management, and emotional burden. Importantly, higher levels of job stress does not necessarily imply teachers' lower proficiency and dedication, and points to the importance of organisational conditions and thus to the need for a reduction of stress through adequate institutional support in the form of ongoing professional development, collaboration and appropriate school level resources (OECD, 2020; Schleicher, 2022).

The Influence of School Support

The study identified significant differences in perceived school support with teachers involved in inclusive education experiencing lower levels of school support than those without involvement. This shows the impact that organisational conditions can have on the professional experience and well-being of teachers. Existing evidence demonstrates that school support is one of the key elements influencing teachers' well-being particularly in situations where they are confronted with complex instructional requirements (Fu et al., 2022; Hascher & Waber, 2021; McCallum et al., 2021). Without appropriate organisational support, the burden of instructional adaptation, differentiating teaching, managing classrooms, and cooperation with families can lead to increased perception of workload and decreased teachers' confidence in applying inclusive methods (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Wang & Chen, 2022).

Within the JD-R framework, school support as a job resource is viewed as diminishing the adverse impacts of high demands, while contributing to motivation and well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Hakanen et al., 2006). Professional training, administrative support, collaboration and teaching resources are examples of school support which can improve teachers' responsiveness to the individual student's needs (OECD, 2020; Schleicher, 2022). These findings can also be viewed from the perspectives of PERMA dimensions of relationships, meaning and accomplishment where supportive relationships with other colleagues and leaders can lead to an increase in teachers' feeling of belonging and confidence in the profession and where appropriate institutional support may lead to an increase in their sense of achievement (Kern et al., 2015; Lavy & Eshet, 2023). Qualitative data supported these points by highlighting the perceived need for professional training, school resources, assistance from administration and opportunities for collaboration with teachers in the field and also by describing situations where appropriate school support helped

teachers to deal with some of the problems of inclusive teaching. It is clear that sustainable inclusive education necessitates not only individual teachers, but also support of appropriate organisational arrangements (Wang & Li, 2023; Zhou & Yao, 2023).

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

Integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to achieve a well-rounded interpretation of teachers' occupational happiness in the context of inclusive education is the main contribution of this study. A convergent mixed methods approach was used to show not only whether there were differences in occupational happiness between teachers with and without SEN teaching responsibilities but also why they differed in terms of context (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Qualitative findings showed that the perceived school support is not just generalised encouragement; it consists of concrete support in terms of provision of resources, teacher training, instructional guidance, administration, and peer collaboration. Taken together, these findings support the JD-R framework by showing that teachers' well-being is contingent not just on the demands associated with inclusive teaching but also on the resources that are available to cope with them (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Hakanen et al., 2006). Additionally, these findings offer a further elaboration of the PERMA model by highlighting that, while meaningful work and commitment to inclusive education can have positive effects on teachers' well-being, these effects may be enhanced when these teachers are afforded adequate relational, organisational, and professional resources (Kern et al., 2015; Seligman, 2011).

To improve teacher occupational happiness, both individual-level and organisational-level measures are necessary; while professional development increases teachers' knowledge and sense of self-efficacy, supportive schools facilitate teachers' professional resources, peer collaboration, and appreciation in the workplace to ensure the continuation of inclusive education practice.

Implications for Inclusive Education in China

Several implications are raised regarding the development of inclusive education in China. Although more emphasis has been placed on the integration of students with SEN into regular schools over the past few years, inclusive education relies on more than just policy compliance; teachers' occupational well-being, professional capacity, and access to organisational support all factor in (UNESCO, 2020; Zhu et al., 2023).

First, this research underscores the importance of expanding professional development opportunities available for mainstream teachers. Due to the higher level of occupational stress and the lower level of occupational happiness found among teachers with SEN teaching responsibilities, professional development should include practical instruction in inclusive pedagogy, differentiated instruction, classroom management, and SEN-related strategies rather than remaining purely theoretical; furthermore, it should involve real-world classroom-based experiences in order to improve teachers' level of confidence and competence (Kurniawati et al., 2021; Sharma & Sokal, 2020).

Second, schools should strengthen the provision of organisational support available to teachers, so that teachers' workloads are aligned with sufficient professional support. Due to the perceived deficit in school support identified by teachers with inclusive education responsibilities, inclusive education will not be realised without organisational assistance in place beyond what is required by policy; schools should create inclusive structures which incorporate school leaders, mainstream teachers, special education professionals, and others, as well as regular professional discussions, peer-to-peer cooperation, and availability of required teaching and learning materials to facilitate teachers' work (McCallum et al., 2021; OECD, 2020).

Finally, education policymakers need to consider teachers' occupational well-being as a key criterion for judging quality in inclusive education, and design policies and resources for teacher support in areas such as teacher workload and teacher working conditions (Collie et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2020). The study's results underscore the importance of transitioning from an approach based on individual responsibility to one of collaborative support, whereby mainstream teachers are not required to cope with inclusive teaching demands alone. Inclusive education can only be sustainable with comprehensive teacher support systems including professional knowledge and expertise, institutional resources, and collaborative spaces for learning (Schleicher, 2022; Zhu et al., 2023).

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations of the present study. First, the study sample was recruited from public schools in a single district in Chengdu. The participants in the sample attended public primary, junior secondary, and senior secondary schools. Even though the data were collected from teachers in three different educational sectors, findings from this study may not fully generalise to teacher experiences in other cities in China or in other countries. The geographical context is an important factor to be considered when studying inclusive education; therefore, it may be beneficial to conduct more in-depth analysis across different cities and countries in the future.

Second, although the present research is able to uncover correlations among variables, a cross-sectional design means it is difficult to make any inferences on causality between inclusive teaching demands, inclusive teaching-related job stress, supportive school climate, and occupational happiness. Longitudinal data are needed for researchers to investigate how well-being outcomes may be related to inclusive education reforms and changes in policies, professional development, and support resources over time (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Third, the quantitative data collected in this study relied on a self-report questionnaire. While the results in this study passed reliability and validity analyses, subjective bias and social desirability bias may still have affected the participants' responses. Future research could benefit from triangulation, combining teacher self-assessments with data sources such as classroom observations, administrative records, peer assessments, or school leader perceptions to obtain a more complete picture of the study variables (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Finally, although the qualitative data shed light on the quantitative results and provide greater insight into teachers' personal perceptions and experiences, the small sample size limits the scope of our knowledge. It will be valuable to include more participants, both teachers and

school leaders, and also to incorporate the experiences of teachers' collaborators such as parents, specialists, or students to broaden our understanding of the complex nature of inclusive education (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Despite these limitations, by combining quantitative and qualitative findings, this study has contributed to a more nuanced view of teachers' occupational happiness in inclusive education, which in turn underscores the importance of balancing inclusive teaching demands and appropriate support resources.

Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to investigate inclusive education teachers' occupational happiness in relation to teaching responsibilities for SEN students in Chinese public schools. A convergent mixed methods design was used, integrating 405 survey responses and semi-structured interviews to develop an integrated picture of teachers' experiences in the Chinese context. The quantitative findings showed that the level of teacher occupational happiness and perceived support significantly differed between teachers with and without inclusive teaching responsibilities. Those teaching responsibilities for SEN students reported a lower level of occupational happiness and perceived school support and a higher level of inclusive teaching-related job stress. The interview data provided further explanation of this finding by indicating that these teachers faced significantly higher teaching load, emotional demand, classroom management demands, and a greater need for professional preparation and resource support than their peers.

This research advances the existing scholarship by establishing teacher occupational happiness as a pivotal element of sustainable inclusive education. Although prior investigations into inclusive education have largely centred upon pupils' participation, accessibility, and learning achievements, the current results suggest that the professional experiences and workplace circumstances of teachers are just as vital to effective execution. The fusion of quantitative and qualitative data additionally demonstrates how the professional happiness of educators is determined by the nexus between the requirements of teaching and the support resources available to teachers. Therefore, improving inclusive education demands not only a focus upon the educational opportunities of pupils but additionally an investigation of the workplace conditions endured by those teachers tasked with inclusive teaching. The enhancement of professional learning, supportive systems, and resources at the school level may enable teachers to handle inclusive teaching requirements, and retain positive occupational happiness. Summing up, sustainable inclusive education relies upon the creation of environments where the teaching staff as well as pupils will be able to thrive, and the acknowledgement of teacher occupational happiness as an integral component of the high quality of inclusive education by the educational agents in China will facilitate the establishment of more effective and sustainable modes of inclusive teaching.

Declarations

Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethics Statement

Participation in this study was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. All questionnaire responses were collected anonymously, interview participants were assigned identification codes to protect their privacy, and all research data were treated confidentially and used solely for academic research purposes.

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